The Ten-Year-Old Translator:
When Childhood Ends at the Landlord's Door

San Kakejani

I learned to negotiate in a language I didn't speak while standing in the rain, watching my parents' faces as another door closed on us.

“Not a rental for Iranians.”

I was ten years old, holding a piece of paper with addresses, serving as the voice for my family in a country that saw us as unwelcome. Three months earlier, we had fled Iran, not from war, but from something quieter and more insidious: the slow suffocation of being invisible in your own family, of watching your father work himself to exhaustion while his brother received every inheritance, every invitation, every shred of dignity.

Turkey was supposed to be our fresh start. Instead, it became my accelerated education in what it means to be displaced.

The Weight of Words

In fourth grade Turkish class, I sat in the corner while my classmates played. They didn't want the Iranian boy who couldn't understand their jokes, couldn't join their games, and couldn't belong. When I tried to approach, they pushed me away, not violently, but with the casual cruelty children reserve for those who are different. So I watched. I looked at their mouths forming words, their gestures, and their laughter. I had no choice but to learn, because my family's survival depended on it.

Within three months, I could speak Turkish well enough to accompany my father to the produce warehouse at 2 AM, translating instructions as he unloaded crates of potatoes and onions for sixteen-hour shifts. Well enough to sit in doctors' offices, explaining my mother's symptoms while she looked down at her hands, embarrassed that her ten-year-old son had to speak for her. Well enough to answer the phone when landlords called, hearing their voices shift from professional to cold the moment they detected our accent.

“Where are you from?”

“Iran.”

Click.

The Mathematics of Hunger

During Kurban Bayramı, Turkey's week-long holiday when everything closes, my father had no work. We had no income. We had no food.

I remember walking through the empty city, watching Turkish families celebrate together while we wandered alone, four people carrying the weight of displacement in a country of belonging. That's when I saw it: a five-lira bill near the base of a tree, probably fallen from someone's pocket during the festivities.

Five liras. At that moment, it was everything.

We bought five loaves of bread. For seven days, that was our food. My mother said she wasn't hungry at dinnertime, pushing her portion toward me and my younger sister. I was old enough to know it was a lie, young enough to still accept it because I didn't know what else to do.

I learned that hunger has a mathematics to it: how to divide limited resources, how to calculate which family member can afford to skip a meal, and how to measure a mother's love in the bread she doesn't eat.

The Invisible Labor

What people don't understand about being a child interpreter is that you don't just translate words, you translate dignity and feelings. When my father stood before a Turkish employer, unable to articulate his skills or negotiate his worth, I had to become his advocate while still learning multiplication tables. When my mother needed medical care but couldn't explain her pain, I became her voice, even when the vocabulary involved was far beyond my fourth-grade comprehension.

Other Iranian families in our neighborhood, adults without children, would find me and ask if I could accompany them to government offices, to banks, and to hospitals. I said yes because I understood their desperation. I had lived it. At ten, eleven, and twelve years old, I was filling out paperwork, deciphering bureaucratic language, and making phone calls that determined whether families could access basic services.

This wasn't a choice. This was survival.

And then, just as I had finally learned to navigate Turkey, we immigrated to America.

Starting Over in English

October 2016. Age twelve. Alexandria, Virginia.

The cycle began again: new language, new bullies, new isolation. I sat in ESL classes unable to ask for water, unable to ask for the bathroom, and unable to exist in my own voice. My classmates laughed at my accent, at my silence, and at the way I frantically scribbled in a Turkish-English dictionary trying to decode their world.

But I had developed something in Turkey that most twelve-year-olds don't have: an understanding that comfort is a luxury and adaptation is survival.

So I learned English. Fast.

Because my father needed me to call insurance companies and negotiate rates we could barely afford. Because my mother needed me to translate at the bank when applying for her first credit card. Because when we bought our used car, the one with 150,000 miles that kept breaking down, I was the one who had to read the Marketplace listing, communicate with the seller, and inspect it while my parents stood beside me, trusting my judgment.

I was thirteen.

The Cost of Being First

I am the first person in my entire extended family, on both sides, going back generations, to attend university. There was no one to ask about college applications, financial aid, major selection, or career paths. Every decision has been educated guesswork, research conducted alone at midnight after finishing homework and handling my parents' mail.

My mother works brutal shifts at a distribution center from 4 AM to 6 PM, standing the entire time, coming home with her body screaming in pain. She never worked outside the home before America. In Iran, her father pulled her from school after ninth grade because “girls don't need education.” Now she works harder than anyone I know, sacrificing her health so I can pursue the education she was denied.

My father cleans bathrooms and mops floors as a school custodian. The man who once had dreams, who fled his country for a better life, now scrubs toilets in a country where he still can't fully communicate.

They did this for me. For my sister. So we could have what they never had: choice.

Why I Write This

I write this not for sympathy, but for recognition. There are millions of children right now serving as their families' translators, advocates, and cultural bridges. They are growing up too fast in grocery store aisles, hospital waiting rooms, and government offices. They are carrying adult responsibilities while still learning fractions.

They are unrecognized, misunderstood, and invisible in policy conversations about immigration, education, and family services.

I write this to say: we exist. Our labor matters. Our childhood, fragmented and interrupted, still deserves acknowledgment.

I write this because when I study computer science at James Madison University, I'm not just pursuing a degree. I'm honoring every sacrifice my parents made, every meal my mother skipped, and every humiliation my father endured at jobs that paid him less because he couldn't speak English well enough to demand fairness.

I write this because my younger sister is watching me, and I want to pave a path easier than the one I walked.

I write this because populations who feel unrecognized and misunderstood deserve someone who will use their voice, hard-earned through years of translation, to finally speak their truth.

The Future I'm Building

I want to build technology that serves people like my family, immigrants navigating systems designed without them in mind. I want to create tools that translate not just language but also access to dignity. I want to write code that opens doors that once slammed in our faces.

But first, I need to finish my education. And in a family living paycheck to paycheck, where my mother still can't afford to stock groceries beyond immediate needs, where we've never owned a car with fewer than 150,000 miles, every scholarship is the difference between continuing and stopping.

This is my story. It's also the story of countless others who remain voiceless. I'm writing so they don't have to be invisible anymore.